

OBITUARY

PATRICIA MARIETJE THOMAS BSc, MSc, AO

13 April 1915 – 16 December 1999



Pat Thomas at Coolgubbin Camp, Connie Sue Hwy, Great Victoria Desert, June 1974.

Patricia Marietje Thomas, Pat to her many friends, died peacefully in Adelaide on 16 December, 1999, bringing to an end an outstanding career in parasitology. The elder of two daughters, Pat was born in Melbourne a year after her famous father, Sir Douglas Mawson, returned from the Antarctic but while he was in America. Pat was raised and educated in Adelaide, receiving her Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Adelaide in 1936, and her Masters degree two years later. She found employment in the Zoology Department as a part-time teacher in practical classes and researcher under Professor T. Harvey Johnston. After marrying marine biologist Ifor Thomas in 1947, and bearing three sons, Pat returned to academic life in 1950, spending most of it, apart from a

short period overseas, in the Zoology Department until her retirement in 1980.

From 1981 until failing health slowed her down in 1995, Pat transferred her activities to the South Australian Museum, where, as an Honorary Curator, she greatly enlarged the helminth collection to a position of pre-eminence in Australia, and successfully pressed for its recognition as the Australian Helminthological Collection. With this achievement, Pat then worked to find a successor to herself, to continue the work, and in 1994 Dr Sylvie Pichelin was appointed as the first Curator of Helminths. Ian Beveridge, a younger colleague of Pat's, has listed her many professional achievements in Obituaries, Royal Society of South Australia (2000).

Pat was a worker, a helper, quick-witted and sharp as a tack, could show kindness and sensitivity when needed, and abhorred irresponsibility. In the following, a little about her personal life has been compiled after talking to some of her friends.

Philippa Horton (Collection Manager, Birds, South Australian Museum). 'I first met Pat Thomas at Adelaide University in 1974 during Zoology 1 practical classes for which Pat was a demonstrator. As a shy student I was in awe of her wealth of experience and knowledge, and was somewhat terrified of her forthright and non-sense manner. During one particular class—the dissection of a rat—a fellow student and I were having trouble in locating an anatomical feature. On being called for help, Pat blustered over, tackled our rat with forceps and scalpel, and severed one of its arteries. The body cavity filled with blood, obliterating anything we might have seen, and rendering the three of us helpless with laughter. From then on any feelings of terror vanished and were replaced with warm affection. One other occasion which stands out in my memory showed the warmth which was not always obvious in Pat's personality. I was pregnant with my first child and, at morning tea at the Museum, expressed the hope that it wasn't going to be twins. Pat described her own experience of giving birth to a son only THEN to find out there was another about to follow. She would have been thrilled with just one but was absolutely delighted to have two beautiful babies. She was filled with maternal love as she spoke and her words were a great comfort to a new mother-to-be. Nurturing twins must call upon extra reserves of physical stamina and strength of character: I was sure Pat had both in abundance.'

Mrs Anne Hardy, Rostrevor. 'I began to work as a technologist in the Zoology Department, University of Adelaide, for 25 shillings per week in 1940. Then the Mawsons were living temporarily in Ruthven Mansions in Pulteney Street. My job was caring for the fish, newts, snails etc. used in the study of parasitic flatworms and often at weekends Pat did it to save me coming in to feed them.

'When the Department moved to the newly constructed Benham Building which overlooked the river on one side and the Jubilee Oval on the other, Pat had the task of packing the huge collection of 'preserves' (specimens from the two 1929–31 British, Australian, New Zealand

Antarctic Expeditions) a challenge which she excelled in.

'Once when the supply of dead rabbits for dissection turned up at the wrong time, it was necessary to skin them. Pat's technique was magnificent; a body held in one hand appeared to almost leap out of its fur. During the war, Pat took up marine biology and often accompanied groups to Port Willunga to study the reef. Her organising abilities were meticulous. As the war ended, undergraduate numbers ballooned out and the Professor deputed Pat and me, then a post-graduate student, to give repeat lectures. Pat had an engaging way with words.

'Occasionally Professor T. Harvey Johnston took us collecting near Tailem Bend and on one occasion, students were allowed to swim off a log in the river. One of the students got herself heavily entwined by the long strands of floating weed and submerged. When her panicky face surfaced, it was Pat who wrenched her out of danger. Typical of Pat, on having saved her life, she gave her a sharp rebuke for having done the wrong thing. One of my vivid memories was at the Spring School at the Marine Research establishment at Cronulla, NSW. Students at the school were housed a mile or more from the laboratories and used a bus to go to lectures unless there was a better offer, which in Pat's case, there soon was. As I waited for the bus, a motor bike with the school's tutor skilfully tackled the sandy track, and riding pillion was a passenger with bright red hair and skirts blowing and a face of blissful exhilaration as she clutched her future spouse Ifor Thomas.

'After her marriage, Pat had developed domestic enthusiasm. When I returned to teaching in the 60s and 70s in Zoology demonstration classes, she had won a shirt ironing contest at the Royal Adelaide Show, and with typical efficiency, produced three sons in fifteen months, sewed, organised and was soon back with her nematodes. I recall that names suggested for the twins were Son and MawSon. Later, Pat followed her mother as President of the Mothers and Babies Health Association.

'Pat and I took part in many of the ornithological excursions, led by Joan Paton, to the Simpson Desert, the Great Victoria Desert, Kakadu and many more. On one such, Pat complained about Rex Ellis's dog which took a dislike to her and protected the essential communal spade from Pat's urgent grasp.'

Mrs Anne Dow, Medindie. 'On an

ornithological excursion to Angorichina with Pat and Joan Paton, Pat overheard someone complaining about the food. Anne remembers Pat's quick response "I never complain about camp food, after all it goes in one end and out the other".

'Around the camp fire Pat had a delightful singing voice.'

Mrs Elizabeth Simpson, Stonyfell. 'The two Mawson girls and we three Cleland girls were great friends and spent much of our lives in the same pursuits. Pat and I were contemporaries at the University and many were the parties and excursions which we attended. I knew that if Pat was in attendance my enjoyment and performance would be heightened and all would be well.

'On many occasions in the bush after dinner I remember Pat with a Tilley lamp dissecting and searching for helminths. On one of Sir Douglas' geology excursions crossing a field, Pat and I noticed a cow giving birth to a calf. Although the cow was feeding placidly, the calf's head was protruding. Blushing hotly, for matters of that nature were a little taboo those days, Pat and I approached Sir Douglas and drew his attention to the phenomenon. Instead of leading the students in a different direction, he drew everyone's attention, in his loudest voice, to the plight of the cow. A minute later a calf was standing with wobbly legs alongside mother.

'Pat was a stimulating companion. She did not suffer fools gladly, even at times, her best friends. There were few of us who had not felt her critical tongue but this in no way detracted from the deep love and respect we held for her.'

Order of Australia Association, South Australian Branch Newsletter No 97; In Memoriam. Awarded AO, Queen's Birthday 1994, for service to the science of zoology in both research and teaching and the development of the Australian Helminthological Collection.

Slim Sommerville (retired zoologist, University of Adelaide) remembers how driving in the country with Pat was so appalling because she insisted on stopping to examine carcasses of dead animals. He also remembers being invited to dinner at the Mawson home in 1954. Sir Douglas sat tall at the head of the table and when kangaroo tail soup was served, he exclaimed 'What's this! I'll have none of it'. This surprised Slim knowing of the horrible food on which Sir Douglas had survived in Antarctica.

Dene Cordes (Department for the Environment), and **Noel Lothian** (formerly Director, Adelaide Botanic Gardens) were associated with Pat through the Board of the National Parks Commissioners and the Wildlife Advisory Council. There she was a particularly astute member whose lifelong interest in environmental matters enabled her to contribute greatly. She was interested in remote areas such as the Koonalda Caves which she urged should become a National Park, and this has since been achieved.

Sylvie Pichelin (Former Curator of Helminths, South Australian Museum). 'I first met Pat in 1995—the same day as the interview for the position of Curator of Helminths at the South Australian Museum. Both events made quite an impression on me. Although I had corresponded with Pat about the Collection, I did not know her personally. I knew of her impressive publication record but at the same time had heard tales of sherry in beakers next to kangaroo guts. I quickly learnt that Pat liked to call a spade a spade—a trait that was appreciated and helped me grasp the size and importance of the Helminth Collection. Pat was also very kind to me on my first visit and took me out to a delightful lunch. There are few like Pat—her death marks the closure of an era of parasitology in Australia.'

Cath Kemper (Curator of Mammals, South Australian Museum). 'Pat was always very interested in expanding the helminth collection so when I started to study (and dissect) cetaceans in the late 1980s she was keen for us to collect parasites and hand them on to her. Several times she came out to Bolivar herself and assisted with dissections. It was great to work with her because she always "hoed in" and nothing was too much trouble. I remember one day when she arrived at Bolivar before us and, not being able to get in and not wanting to do nothing, she set to work weeding the patio in front of the kitchen! It looked lovely and tidy when we arrived. I always had a great admiration for her because it would not have been easy to have been a female scientist earlier in her life. Science was something that men did and the few women involved were often considered odd. Pat was able to combine family and work so was just like everyone else, only much more determined than most!'

Archie McArthur (Honorary Research Associate, South Australian Museum). 'When I